

Where to go for your next great employee? Try BCTC

If you are looking for an addition to your work team, Dr. A. James Kerley holds a key. He has 12,300 prospects

for you, give or take

a few hundred. He heads Bluegrass Community and Technical College, or BCTC.



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What exactly is that, you say? Kerley understands the confusion over the identity, since he is reframing the way we see our area workforce, and our future, and post-high school education. You may still be calling his operation LCC, or Lexington Community College, but that name is gone.

Beyond the East Cooper Drive classroom buildings and the president's office by Commonwealth Stadium — the old LCC — are a series of five central Kentucky campuses, which comprise BCTC.

As president and CEO, Kerley radiates energy and excitement, and loves his students' hunger for a better life, a productive workforce contribution and success.

In the shadow of U.K. and Transylvania University along with other post-secondary education options, BCTC is booming.

What does this mean? Just as an example, suppose central Kentucky could win an economic development competition resulting in 1,000 new jobs, good ones. Forces would join to chase the prize.

According to Kerley, we're winning it right now, quietly and effectively. Central Kentucky has the capacity to put 1,000 well-prepared professionals to work in health care — fairly quickly and without huge infrastructure expansion.

The physical plants are here — hospitals, office parks, treatment centers. So is the workforce. So are the degrees and training.

Kerley credits Arnold Gaither with this specific example of economic progress already underway. Gaither is executive director of the Central Kentucky Job Center on Industry Road in Lexington.

Gaither refers "a whole lot of prospects, just a lot of people" to BCTC, and says that "Jim always wants to know about a specific employment need or employer problem. Health care is just one crown jewel for us."

Granted, a lot of health care workforce comes right out of BCTC. Reframing the way we see the economic growth line, it is simple but more sensible to grow what we have — health care — versus finding new sectors. "Again, it's reframing the way we



Bluegrass Community and Technical College President and CEO James Kerley in the school's lobby.

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CHRIS ROSENTHAL

expand jobs and increase services," Kerley notes. Ticking through the numbers for his own institution's growth, Kerley is optimistic with good reason.

His Winchester campus in a new industrial park started small, "but now has about 375 students, and we'll have twice that many in two or three years," he predicts. This means a smarter workforce, too.

To make it happen, leaders in Clark County are raising the money to make sure BCTC has an appropriate home, a new classroom building, targeting \$1.5 million in local support.

"We're comprehensive in our coursework for those who want to transfer from us to a university," Kerley says. "Many go straight to the workplace from our technical programs, but others can go to the traditional four-year programs."

In Danville, where historic Centre College still ranks highly among the nation's best small institutions, BCTC is thriving. "We started with 31 students, now have about 400 and should hit 700 to 800 by 2010."

Down the road in Lawrenceburg, "we have about 250 but should have 500 to 600 soon." Every semester BCTC grows, which translates into graduates and certificate holders for the central Kentucky payroll, for the building trades or industrial maintenance, LPNs or associate degree recipients of varied majors and academic interests.

These are students who move into jobs paying about \$35,000 for starters, maybe more. Jimmy Nash, the prominent homebuilder, appreciates BCTC as a source of this growing workforce.

So does Jim Gray, CEO of Gray Construction. Architecture technicians are at the center of his highly successful

company. BCTC is "one of the first lines of recruitment. We depend heavily on these team members and depend on Dr. Kerley and the institution to produce well-prepared graduates.

"They're turning out the technology workforce of the future," Gray adds. But uniting the student body with the greater marketplace is a challenge.

"We're fragmented," in how they match the new grad with the open spot, Kerley admits, a widely held view among local workforce experts.

We still think too much in terms of Lexington. "We are fortunate to have U.K. and private colleges all doing a great job," Kerley says. "However, the reality of how we live and work is very much oriented to the region."

In spite of some very traditional thinking, "there is a small group building steam," Kerley believes. He gives credit to Commerce Lexington, another retooled organization, and Pamela Trautner, director of workforce development.

Kerley is an experienced hand at regional thinking. He spent nine years as president of Hopkinsville Community College, with an eye on the nearby Nashville market and another on the western Kentucky economy.

He's been around the academic block, preparing for the top spot with a doctorate from Florida State, having earned a master's at the Citadel and his bachelor's from Tennessee Tech.

He was a dean at Madisonville Community College and a department head at Union College in Barbourville. Now he has a \$32 million commitment to construct a new building at the Cooper Drive campus, where 60 percent of his student body takes classes. He's equally determined to build new facili-

ties at his other sites. Kerley champions diversity, such as Hispanic student enrollment growth, and pushes for flexible scheduling to make sure students get what they need when they can take it. More than this, he wants to make certain that the central Kentucky economy finds his grads. And that's the crux of the workforce issue for area business and its potential employees — how to put a system in place to track every job and every job-ready person.

Right now if a source of employees finds out about a great job, mum's the word. Cities with advanced solutions aggregate all of those hiring and all those in the workforce. Transparency works to the advantage of the job market from every angle. Everyone knows all the jobs coming. Everyone can see the whole universe of potential hires.

At the heart of such a system is a regional bond. Kerley was pro-region before it became a talking point and trend, recalling the battle cry for regional thinking and early action back in the 1990s.

He ardently believes that the essential work of the future will find its preparation in institutions like BCTC.

But it will take a special showcase to capture all of the elements — jobs, job seekers, and those who get people ready for jobs. As a CEO himself, Kerley can see the vision and imagine the results.

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